

THE NATIONAL ERA, WASHINGTON, MARCH 23, 1848.

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The story on our fourth page, which will attract the attention of the reader, is copy-righted by the author. We shall enclose it in two numbers more.

This week we find ourselves unexpectedly crowded on the inside of the paper, by the important foreign news and Congressional matter, that we are compelled to lay over a great deal of other matter—news, literary notices, poetry, and editorial—all next week.

BRITISH WEST INDIES.

The attention of the British public has lately been drawn to the condition and claims of the West India interest. Memorials have gone up from the planters and merchants, representing that total ruin will soon overwhelm the Colonies unless Parliament interpose in their behalf. They state that the six hundred and forty-three sugar estates, which existed before the Emancipation Act, one thousand and forty, embracing one hundred and sixty thousand slaves, had employed two thousand laborers at a cost of production of twenty-two thousand dollars per annum; that the coffee plantations have all been given up; that the colored laborers will not work more than five days in the week; that the Coölil immigration has proved a failure, and that sugar cannot be raised without great loss. "Actually," says the London Times, "West India property is in a state of ruin. In these colonies, at this moment, property cannot be sold, security cannot be assigned, the interest upon money cannot be realized, and advances are refused to enable the planter to produce a crop which can be sold up to return the bare cost of production."

Doubtless, there is great exaggeration, but after making all due allowance for it, it must be admitted that there is a remarkable depression of the planting interest, and great distress among the employers, in the British West Indies. The advocates of slavery in this country are already pointing triumphantly to this state of things, as furnishing conclusive evidence of the folly of the Emancipation Act. But it also could be expected. Emancipation, after so many years of constant and sharp, protracted labor was required to produce enough to meet the demands upon them. But the Act of Emancipation left the peasant at liberty to make their own bargains. Women and children worked before; but they were now, to a considerable extent, withdrawn from field labor. This was the first step towards the elevation of the former, and the education of the latter. It was right, but its effect on sugar-planting was injurious. Again, the laborers had been compelled to work sixteen or eighteen hours before the introduction of the negro; but they now would work only such a proportion of their time, as would give them a comfortable sustenance. Were they to be blamed for this? Was it rational to expect that he who labored as a slave, when he might set his price on his labor, and had a free meal, in exchange for his services, would work longer than he who labored as a slave, when he might be compelled to work for his master, in order to procure the means of subsistence, the same want of labor and all the attendant difficulties of a slave? And when we consider how injurious it is to the negro to be compelled to work for his master, when he might set his price on his labor, and have a free meal, in exchange for his services, we see that he is more easily deprived; then, protection for their slaves, and making them believe that they are not worth what they are, that he should be compelled to do a reasonable amount of work in return for his subsistence. He differed from those who had never had slaves, even now the West Indian planters might have saved themselves. But instead of conforming themselves to the new state of things, and making the best of it, by consolidating the laborers, and taking an interest in their welfare, paying them fair wages, studying economy, and making every effort to increase their value, they have, in a sum of twenty millions, a large sum, next, designated to themselves as much labor at as little cost to them as possible, and with an entire disregard of the comfort of the laborers, whom they are apt to regard as mere tools of production, who are to be regarded as nothing more than the means of extracting a profit from the market?" * * * "But the evil does not rest here. The slaves are, in consequence, removed from many comforts which they would otherwise enjoy from the prosperity of their masters!"

The present distresses of the West Indian planters is by no means unprecedented. Under the system of slavery, according to their own statements, the reports of committees and official documents, they were frequently on the verge of ruin, and their clamors for relief were as loud as they are now. In the year of 1829, the Standing Committee of West India Planters and Merchants presented a petition of relief to the Government, designed to show the deplorable condition of the Colonies, and imploring aid to save them from ruin. *Op. cit.*

For many years the distress of the planters in the Leeward Islands generally, labor under the weighty task to pay the charges of the Civil Service, now existing as they do now, not on the annual profits, but on the *actual capital* expended, every year, in the purchase of slaves, has been increased, from the nature and tenure of their property, to hold estates which they could not sell; because the value of revenue, produces nothing but what is lost in the cost of the *capital in the market!*" * * * "But the evil does not rest here. The slaves are, in consequence, removed from many comforts which they would otherwise enjoy from the prosperity of their masters!"

One might suppose, from the language of these memorials now sent up to Parliament, that these old papers had served as a model—for almost the very same expressions are used.

On the 25th May, 1830, (under the system of slavery) the Committee of West India Merchants presented a memorial to Government, in which they say that "many estates have not paid the expenses of their cultivation for the past year;" that "the debt has been increased by the proprietors in consequence of the expense exceeding the sale of the crop;" that "many other estates more favorably situated" have not produced enough to pay the interest of the mortgages on them; that the remainder of the estates still more favorably situated, have yielded so little income that "great distress has fallen upon the families of the proprietors;" that "the result of the success of the slaves" is to be more disastrous than that of the past year;" &c.—and this extract was signed by twenty-six West India houses of the highest respectability.

A select committee was appointed by the House of Commons, February 7th, 1831, to report on the subject; and the London Reporter publishes the testimony of numerous witnesses examined by that committee, demonstrating a state of extreme distress in all the Colonies. Merchants refused to grant further advances. Many of the planters were reduced almost to the point of bankruptcy, and had arisen of the Colonies, or else emigrated, or else died. Many proprietors said the distress would not be greater. In Antigua, Montserrat, the whole of the Leeward Islands, a universal bankruptcy was threatened, and it was apprehended that the negro population could not be provided for. The Council and Assembly of St. Kitts say, in their memorial, that the "struggle is not for restoration to that prosperity which once enveloped them, but for bread;" and they add—"Scarcely is an ancestor in possession of its patrimony, and that the negro population could not be provided for. The wealth of the Colony is at a standstill."

The agent for St. Vincent, Dominica, St. Kitts, Nevis, and the Virgin Isles, said—"Loans could not, in consequence, be procured at the island interest with the commercial advantages together equal to fifteen or twenty per cent., while money could be had on landed security at four per cent."

Precisely the same statement is made now of the Colonies!

The secretary of the Committee of West India Merchants said, that "much the larger proportion of the estates was encumbered by debt or mortgag-

es." The system of slave labor, if we are to believe the testimony of the planters and merchants of the Colonies, of their committees and assemblies, and of

the selected committees of the British Parliament, the islands were on the very brink of ruin, at the extreme point of embarrassment and distress, threatened with universal bankruptcy, with no hope of relief but from the Imperial Government. Now, if the present distress is to be attributed to Emancipation, which took place fifteen years ago, to what was to be attributed the distress of 1829 and 1830, and of the periodical crises anterior to those dates?

How, then, are the existing embarrassments of the British West Indies to be explained? In the debates on the subject, in the House of Commons, the representation of the West Indian interest, the Emancipation Act is rarely referred to as the cause. The Committee of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society charged it upon the abolition, in 1816, of the differential duties between free and slave-grown sugars. The free-trade section of the Abolitionists, dissenting from this view, assert that the colonies have been ruined by protection, have so long been accustomed to rely upon Government aid, that, being thrown upon their own resources by its partial withdrawal, they have not enough to fit into the market. The same argument is urged by the Abolitionists. We have shrewdly seen that before Emancipation, the islands were liable to greater commercial revolutions, occurring periodically. This will be the case in every community where the credit system prevails, and especially in planting countries, where labor and capital are invested in the cultivation of one or two staples, they are peculiarly exposed to loss and embarrassment, from a sudden fall in prices. It was under this state of things that "a large proportion of the islands were entirely voluntary, and regulated by the demands of the market, not carried on by the Government to remove, either by force or by law." The recent movement in France, and to a still greater extent in England, has undoubtedly been produced by the same causes, and in a much more violent manner. The importers of the money on drawings, tem-

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